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Populism in the eye of the beholder? A conjoint experiment on citizens' identification of populists

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Abstract. Despite decades of research on the nature and characteristics of populism, and on how political actors interpret populist attitudes, the study of how the public identify populist politicians remains a largely unexplored topic. Is populism in the eye of the beholder? What causes voters to perceive a political actor as populist? Is there any systematic heterogeneity in the evaluation of candidates among citizens according to their individual characteristics? We fill this gap by analysing what characteristics of politicians, and the political statements they make, drive citizens to classify them as populist. Furthermore, we investigate how the cognitive, ideological and attitudinal profiles of citizens shape their perceptions. To this end, we report results of a conjoint experiment embedded in a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of Italian citizens. Respondents were asked to evaluate different political statements by politicians, of whom we manipulated a variety of relevant attributes (e.g., their ideological profile, gender, previous occupation). Results indicate two clear trends: (i) More than the profile of politicians, what matters for their identification as populist is their rhetoric. (ii) The cognitive (with the partial exception of education) and ideological profiles of respondents are largely inconsequential. At the same time, populist voters are substantively less likely to identify populism as such.

Keywords: populism; conjoint experiment; candidate profile; voter profile; Italy

Introduction

Populism, beyond its electoral dynamics, has undoubtedly become an ever-present buzzword in the political arena, on social media, in TV news, and everywhere people discuss politics (Hunger & Paxton, 2021). After the ‘party-gate’ scandal that marred the UK government in early 2022, *The Guardian* noted that ‘Boris Johnson prepares a populist offensive to save his skin’, criticizing the prime minister’s supposedly populist agenda that includes ‘sending in the military to help tackle cross-Channel migration’ and ‘training schemes for universal credit claimants’ (Stewart, 2022). Similarly, Donald Trump’s ‘Save America’ speech on 6 January 2021, and Silvio Berlusconi’s recent campaign to become the new President of the Italian Republic were widely described as populist (Damilano, 2022; Viala-Gaufrey, 2022). If these latter two examples seem easily justifiable, notably in terms of populist tropes such as anti-elitism and demagoguery, the initial example feels more like a journalistic rhetorical frame.

Scholars of different fields have investigated populism for decades, trying to unveil its nature and describe its characteristics, providing a vast array of diverging definitions. Although academics still disagree on some features of populism, a consensus exists on its core characteristics, namely populism as a ‘thin’ ideology centred on anti-elite and people-centric beliefs (Mudde, 2004). This

vision somehow contrasts, though sometimes is complementary, to interpretations of populism as mainly a set of rhetorical frames (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) or a performative style (Moffitt, 2016). Beyond this primary definition, as we discuss below, a set of second-order features characterize the debate on populism. In particular, studies focused on the link between populism and nationalist, xenophobic attitudes, or leftist, demagogic postures, as well as bad political manners, or even commendable attention to the needs of the people (Caiani & Graziano, 2019; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Rydgren, 2017).

Within this variegated framework, populism and those political actors identified as populist, suffer from a normative disadvantage. Populists are often stigmatized by citizens and the media for their alleged demagogic and deceitful approach to politics, their supposed incoherence or incompetence and their more aggressive rhetoric (Harteveld et al., 2022). Still, positive attributes – charisma, closeness to the average citizen, a more genuine political style free of those ‘politically correct’ norms that render mainstream politics so inefficient – are ascribed sometimes to populists (Canovan, 2005).

Populism, in other terms, is often equated with a wide palette of attributes and can be easily weaponized by its proponents or detractors, depending on the political frame they pursue. Examples of these competing normative frames abound: Casiraghi and Bordignon (2023) showed how in European Parliaments left-wing politicians are accused of populism more often when the political discussion centres on economic issues, whereas their right-wing colleagues are attacked more frequently when the debate concerns immigration. Adopting a similar focus, Elmgren (2018) demonstrated how the Finnish Rural Party proudly claimed populism as one of its positive characteristics, whereas Casiraghi (2021) showed how the British Conservatives systematically refused to be defined as populist.

Despite this wealth of research, populism remains a fluid concept – ‘a pathology, a style, a syndrome and a doctrine’ (Stanley, 2008, p. 95). Is Boris Johnson a populist? Are Trump and Berlusconi? It is not our aim to answer these questions, and a widespread literature exists already that addresses the matter of classifying populist movements (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Yet, these questions – and their answers – shed light on a theoretical and empirical puzzle that has received scant attention so far: What causes voters to perceive a political actor as populist?

Although scholars recently moved the focus from the nature and characteristics of populism to how political actors identify populism (e.g., Casiraghi & Bordignon, 2023), no study so far has addressed how citizens perceive populist politicians and attitudes. For sure, studies have analysed the relation between the public and populism, for instance investigating how populist rhetoric influence voters (Bos et al., 2020) or what factors increase support for populist parties (Spruyt et al., 2016). From a different perspective, scholars have measured populist attitudes among voters (Akkerman et al., 2014) and linked such postures to various political preferences, like conspiratorial thinking (Balta et al., 2022) and economic policies (Guiso et al., 2017). Hence, although we have evidence about why citizens vote for populist parties and who is more likely to adopt populist attitudes, a gap still characterizes the identification of the factors driving voters to identify a political actor as populist.

We will address this as well as whether there is systematic heterogeneity in the evaluation of candidates among citizens according to their individual characteristics. In particular, we focus on three sets of attributes, which broadly reflect the complexity of their ‘mind’ (Van Hiel et al., 2010): *Cognitive* characteristics (education, political interest), *ideological* characteristics (ideological proximity) and *attitudinal* characteristics (populist attitudes, trust in political institutions). To this

end, we report results of a conjoint experiment embedded in a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of Italian citizens. Respondents evaluated different political statements by fictive politicians, of whom we manipulated relevant attributes, and decided whom of the two politicians they would consider more populist. Italy stood out as a relevant case study, as various kinds of populist actors have emerged powerfully in the Italian political arena recently. Overall, our results indicate two trends: (i) more than the profile of politicians, what matters for them to be identified as populists is their rhetoric. (ii) The cognitive and ideological profile of respondents is largely inconsequential; instead, populist voters are substantively less likely to identify populism as such.

The article is structured as follows. The next section lays out our theoretical framework and expectations. The third section presents our data and method, highlighting the details of our survey and analysis. The fourth section discusses our findings, whereas the conclusion offers some implications and sketches avenues for future research.

Populism in the eye of the beholder?

Arguably, different citizens should perceive populism, and populist rhetoric, differently. This does not imply, of course, that such perceptions are exclusively driven by the profile of the observer – rather, the nature of candidates and rhetoric employed is likely to drive perceptions of populism in the first place. With this in mind, we develop our theoretical discussion as a two-step argument: (i) The characteristics of politicians and their rhetoric are likely associated with them being perceived as populists (our ‘baseline’), and (ii) this differs depending on citizens’ cognition, ideology and political attitudes.

Although we explore a mostly uncharted territory, we also derive our argument from previous studies that investigated the relation between voters and populism. For instance, scholars demonstrated that anti-elitist, people-centric attitudes increase support for populist parties (Akkerman et al., 2014) and that populist rhetoric is more appealing to the ‘lower educated and the politically cynical’ (Bos et al., 2013). Our argument and experimental design resonate with these previous studies, although adopting a new focus and employing an innovative methodological approach. Indeed, we rely on a conjoint framework and we depart theoretically from the issue of how populist are citizens (or when populist messages are effective) to address the conditions under which citizens perceive politicians as populist.¹

The baseline: Populist rhetoric and candidate characteristics

We argue that the public should perceive populism mainly through the rhetoric employed – the statements that politicians express – considering whether the scope of such rhetoric is demagogic, anti-elite, people-centric or politically incorrect, amongst other features (Bos et al., 2020). As said regarding populism’s core characteristics, we focus on the two crucial components of populist rhetoric: anti-elitism and people-centrism (Mudde, 2004). Anti-elitism is historically associated with populist stances and movements: Casiraghi (2021) showed how since 1970 British parliamentary discourses on populism have highlighted the anti-elitist character of populism. From a strategic standpoint, this makes sense: Populists tend to stand outside of the political establishment, and the public should identify their oppositional anti-elitism for what it is (Maurer & Diehl, 2020).

Moreover, populism seems to go hand in hand with rhetorical aggressiveness. Across the world, populists seem to take pleasure in displaying ‘bad manners’, a more uncivil and ‘low’ style of politics, and more frequently use an ‘offensive’ discourse ‘filled with invectives, ironies, sarcasm, and even personal attacks’ (Corbu et al., 2017, p. 328). Indeed, evidence suggests that populists introduce ‘a more negative, hardened tone to the debate’, relying on negative campaigns centred on anti-elite rhetoric (Immerzeel & Pickup, 2015, p. 350).

On the other hand, studies demonstrated how people-centric messages are another fundamental characteristic of populist rhetoric (Canovan, 2005). Here, populist politicians frequently find supporting ideologies and strategic incentives to convey political statements that provide the public with an enhanced level of political relevance (Zaslove et al., 2021). Hence, politicians who voice statements that clearly employ an anti-elite or people-centric rhetoric should be perceived as more populist compared to politicians that express more ‘classic’ political claims.

However, the *rhetoric* of candidates may not be the only feature that paints them under a populist light. Second-order features are also important to define what populism is and to investigate which factors should drive citizens to perceive political actors as populist. In particular, the *intrinsic characteristics* of who they are might play a role. We focus on three factors: first, their ideological profile likely participates in whether voters construe them as populists. Evidence suggests that populism exists on both sides of the political spectrum. On the left, parties have been often accused of populism, from Latin American populism (Weyland, 2001) to more recent examples, such as Podemos in Spain or the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy (Caiani et al., 2021). Such accusations, or descriptions, regard most often their attitudes towards economic policies such as opposition to trade openness and anti-establishment positions (Van der Waal & de Koster, 2018). Yet, populism seems traditionally associated more tightly with the (radical) right. According to the so-called ‘populist hype’, the public, the media and political actors alike associate populism with radical-right, nationalist attitudes (Glynos & Mondon, 2019) – a thesis supported by how right-wing parties in Europe and beyond have adopted strong, controversial stances on topics such as immigration and European integration (Rydgren, 2005). Therefore, we expect that right-wing politicians are more likely than their left-wing colleagues to be perceived as populist.

Second, which nuances the first point, beyond politicians’ ideological stance their ideological extremism could be associated with the public perceiving them as populists. Here, the extreme–mainstream divide, more than the right–left cleavage, may be decisive: citizens would identify moderate, mainstream parties as less populist than extreme parties, describing a U-relation between populism and ideology (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). This resonates with recent research on the use of aggressive rhetoric in elections worldwide. For instance, Nai (2020) showed that more extreme candidates, on the left and right, are significantly more likely to ‘go negative’ on their rivals. Similarly, Casiraghi and Bordignon (2023) demonstrated that ‘extreme’ politicians, in particular in the extreme left, are more often accused of populism in parliamentary debates compared to their centrist colleagues.

Third, a case could be made that male politicians are more likely to be labelled as populist than their female counterparts. Evidence exists that citizens ascribe positive or negative characteristics to political candidates also as a function of gender, mostly due to entrenched stereotypes (Bernhard, 2022; Koch, 2000). On populism, its inherent aggressiveness – in terms of greater reliance on hostile rhetoric (Nai, 2021) – could be more easily associated with masculine leadership traits. This is in light of the fact that women in politics tend traditionally (and stereotypically) to be perceived ‘as warm, people-oriented, gentle, [and] kind’ whereas men are more usually seen as

‘tough, aggressive, and assertive’ (Banducci et al., 2012, p. 165). This conclusion seems also supported from a descriptive standpoint, as supposed populists tend to be overwhelmingly male. For every Meloni, there are many Berlusconi, Grillo and Salvini. For every Le Pen, there are many Zemmour and Mélenchon.

Finally, since much of the populist, anti-elite rhetoric negatively targets professional politicians – those that spent their entire career as politicians – we focus on the previous occupation of our fictional politicians. While cases abound of ‘professional’ politicians with a clear populist profile – from Salvini in Italy to Le Pen in France – the critique against ‘system’ elites remains a core feature of populist rhetoric. Surfing on the general discontent of the more cynical part of the electorate with ‘politicians’ as a social category (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004), populists often strive to frame their profile as *not* being part of traditional politics – for instance, highlighting their non-political origins (e.g., in business, as for Trump). Therefore, framing a political figure as ‘not a professional politician’ should be expected to echo populist tropes (Peters & Pierre, 2019). To summarize, we expect as a ‘baseline’ trend that anti-elitist and people-centrist rhetoric as well as candidates on the right, more extreme, male, and who are not professional politicians, are more likely to be perceived as populist.

Citizen characteristics

Populism is likely to be in the eye of the beholder as well. We know what the characteristics of voters are that drive them to support populist actors (e.g., lower education, lack of political trust), but no study has yet investigated whether the same features drive citizens’ perceptions towards populism. Hence, we build our expectations on what previous literature has suggested regarding individual support for populism, and we integrate such evidence with novel expectations. In particular, we focus on three factors: cognitive, ideological and attitudinal. First and concerning *cognitive* factors, we believe that voters with lower levels of education and interest in politics are *less likely* to identify populism as such. The rationale for supporting this expectation comes from research in both cognitive and political psychology and recent trends in information processing. Research showed that low education is linked to voters with lower political knowledge, lesser systematic reasoning and weaker higher order and critical thinking (Galston, 2001; Grönlund & Milner, 2006; Miri et al., 2007).

Among other dual models of reasoning, the elaboration-likelihood model of persuasion (ELM: Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) formalizes explicitly the role of factual knowledge in reasoning. According to ELM, the capacity of individuals to engage in issue-relevant thinking (‘elaboration’ in ELM) stems from a combination of high motivation (interest) and the ability to process the information received (O’Keefe, 2013), itself a function of prior knowledge and education. In other terms, as described in the heuristic-systematic model (Todorov et al. 2002), complementary to the ELM, high levels of understanding and previous knowledge about a matter are instrumental in evaluating the validity of new information. The role of education and knowledge as the catalyst for a ‘deeper’ evaluation of political information is supported by research investigating the processing of ‘extra-factual’ information (Greenhill, 2019). Notably, a positive association between low education levels and susceptibility to disinformation (Buchanan, 2020; Hwang et al., 2021), effectiveness of political persuasion and beliefs in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen, 2017) has been shown – suggesting that low education and knowledge are associated with poorer information processing. Taken together, these research agendas suggest that high levels of education and

interest provide incentives to think deeply about the matters at stake and new information, whereas low levels make individuals more likely to fall prey to manipulation and information distortions.

Hence, given the ‘thin’ and fluid character of populism, to the point that scholars themselves often disagree on its facets, we expect the evaluation of ‘populism’ across citizens to vary based on their education levels and political interest. For sure, we are not arguing that low levels of political sophistication are associated with weaker processing of populist information – actually, the reverse case could be made. Instead, our argument is that higher cognitive skills are required for the *analytical* side of information processing – that is, identifying populist rhetoric *as such*, regardless of whether this information was perceived positively or negatively (the *evaluative* side of information processing). In this sense, education can be expected to foster greater analytical skills, necessary for the correct identification of a phenomenon, regardless of its evaluation (and effectiveness).

Second and concerning *ideological* factors, we focus on citizens’ political preferences. Voters should be influenced by their own preferences so that ideological proximity with a candidate should lead to more positive evaluations. The rationale supporting this expectation is straightforward: Research in information processing, political cues and the moderating role of individual ideological profiles has shown that voters tend to engage in ‘motivated reasoning’ (Taber & Lodge, 2016), through which ideologically congruent information is evaluated more positively and incongruent information is discounted. For instance, people tend to read newspapers that are ideologically closer to them (Curini, 2022), if only for a confirmation bias.

Indeed, studies showed that ideological proximity is a primary heuristic cue to infer judgments about political leaders (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015; Lockwood, 2017). For example, comparing a series of surveys among U.S. respondents, Nai and Maier (2021) claimed that conservatives are more likely than liberals to evaluate Trump as scoring high in conscientiousness, but less likely to score him high on narcissism or psychopathy.

Hence, because ideological proximity should naturally lead to more positive evaluations, and populism can intrinsically be considered a normatively challenged concept, we expect heterogeneity in citizens’ evaluations of populism according to their relative ideological proximity (distance) from a given politician. Such a rationale reflects well-known social identity dynamics, where the (political) out-group is more likely to be assigned negative stereotypes (Mason, 2018), and because the political out-group is negatively construed it becomes automatically more salient and noteworthy (Soroka, 2014).

Finally, and concerning *attitudinal* factors, we focus here on two attitudes related to how citizens engage with politics: populist attitudes and trust in political institutions. Our argument is that populism is frequently seen as antithetic to the ‘liberal’ definition of democracy (Mueller, 2019; but see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), and that should be easily identifiable especially among the supporters of the latter (low populist attitudes, high trust), again according to the negativity bias (Soroka, 2014). Indeed, populist voters should be more likely to support populist candidates (Akkerman et al., 2014; Zaslove et al., 2021). Beyond the overlap of their (thin) ideological frames, consistent research on the role of personality traits in politics suggests the existence of congruence between the personality of leaders and their followers. According to the ‘homophily’ hypothesis, individuals with congruent personality profiles tend to be attracted to each other (Selfhout et al., 2010). In politics, this translates into voters being predisposed to like candidates with a character that matches theirs (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017).

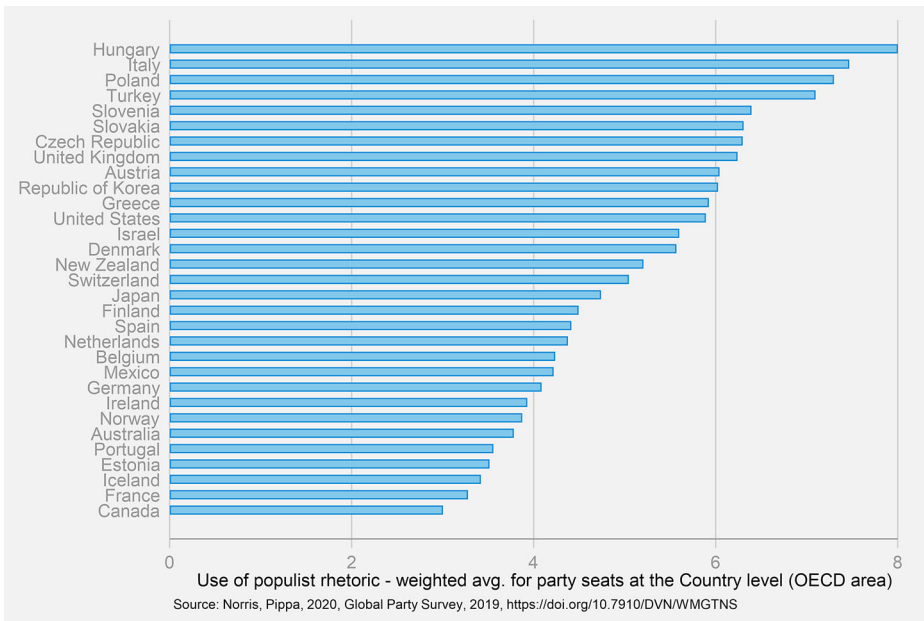


Figure 1. The relevance of populist rhetoric across OECD countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In addition, the trust the people put in the parliament, usually the most important representative, a democratic institution in democracies, could influence their perception of populism. Previous studies have shown how trust in political institutions negatively correlates with populist attitudes (Eberl et al., 2021). Consequently, we expect to find a sub-group heterogeneity with respect to citizens' populist attitudes and their relative degree of trust towards democratic institutions in general.

Method

Data and sample

We test our hypotheses with experimental data gathered via a survey distributed by Demetra to a representative sample of Italian citizens ($N = 1,000$) in early 2022. As populism can assume diverse forms and vary on different degrees, we decided to focus on a country that experienced great variation in terms of populist political actors and topics discussed in the political arena. In the last decade, Italy saw the emergence of one of the most successful, standard case of a populist party, the M5S, a left-inclining and widely heterogeneous party that since 2013 obtained many electoral victories (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). On the other hand, right-wing actors with different policy positions, such as on immigration and economic affairs, were identified as populist. For instance, both Forza Italia and the League were consistently accused, and more rarely praised, for their populism by scholars and media alike (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2005; Bobba, 2019). Overall, according to our analysis of the database recently introduced by Norris (2020), Italy figures as second in terms of the use of populist rhetoric among OECD countries (see Figure 1).

Italy is, hence, an interesting case for the investigation of how citizens identify populism. On the one hand, the large prevalence (and variety) of populism and populist actors in this country could make this case conservative. Certainly, it is much easier to identify phenomena when they clearly stand out from the norm. Similarly, identifying populists specifically in a setting where populism is prevalent should be comparatively harder than in other countries where populism is a more marginal phenomenon. Specifically, it should be harder in Italy, compared to other countries, to identify the presence of populism only based on ideological cues, given the widespread presence of populism on both political sides.

On the other hand, voters should be more familiar with the content of populist rhetoric, making it easier for them to identify it as such. Overall, Italy seems to represent both a hard-case scenario likely to produce conservative estimates (for the identification of populism via ideological cues) and an easier scenario for the identification of populist rhetoric. While this likely makes it harder for our results to replicate fully outside of the Italian case, the variety of populism here offers a valuable setting for the unfolding of our conjoint design, making all combinations about equally likely.

Manipulation

We presented respondents with a vignette in a fully randomized conjoint framework. Conjoint designs allow researchers to study the independent effects on respondents' preferences of many features of complex multidimensional objects (Hainmueller et al., 2014), as the evaluation of populism is. Indeed, conjoint analyses, and vignettes more broadly, are particularly useful when defining a concept theoretically is controversial, as clearly is the case for populism, and hence a bottom-up approach – that is asking the people – may provide a decisive contribution (King & Wand, 2007). Here, our results allow scholars to pinpoint more effectively the core and second-order features of populism, adopting the novel perspective of which factors drive citizens to define a politician as populist. Moreover, such an approach is well suited to detect any systematic heterogeneity in respondents' evaluations according to specific sub-group characteristics, therefore allowing us to explore the possible role played by informative, ideological and attitudinal factors. Finally, by precisely abstracting away from real-world contexts, an experiment like ours could prevent voters' in-built biases being quite as prevalent as they would be otherwise, improving the quality of the 'signal' we detect.

With respect to result estimation, following Leeper et al. (2020) we computed the 'marginal means' (MM), which do not depend on an arbitrarily selected reference category, contrary to the 'average marginal component effect'. This makes 'marginal means' more appropriate when the aim is to run a comparison of subgroup preferences. In particular, in our experiment we randomly generated two candidate profiles, displayed next to each other; respondents had to decide which of the two profiles they consider as 'more populist.' Based on these answers, we run a discrete-choice conjoint analysis (Martini & Olmastroni, 2021). In our forced-choice design with two alternatives, MM has a direct interpretation as probabilities, hence reflecting the probability of a profile being selected when it contains a certain level averaged over all remaining attributes. Moreover, since each respondent made two comparisons (i.e., two different sets of competing profiles), we account for the non-independence of observations by using clustered standard errors at the respondent level.²

Table 1. Statements and politicians' attributes (conjoint profiles, independent randomization)

Attribute	Levels
Statement	Concerning the economic policy of the country, the people and not politicians, should take the most important decisions The majority of people that rule this country are corrupt. It would be right to abolish any form of direct public financing of political parties We cannot bear that leaders of organized crime get away with their crimes because of bureaucratic mistakes Respecting rules is not a waste of time, but the only effective tool to avoid that new emergencies follow previous ones
Gender	Man Woman
Previous job	Professional politician Entrepreneur Manual worker Public employee
Political ideology	Left Centre-left Centre Centre-right Right

Each profile consists of attributes (e.g., gender) which can take different levels (e.g., male or female). Which level a certain attribute takes is fully randomized uniformly (i.e., with equal probabilities for all levels in a given attribute) and independently from one another (Bansak et al., 2019). Following the different dimensions of candidate selection described above, we use four attributes for describing the candidate profiles. The first attribute is related to rhetoric. Here, we selected two highly populist and two not populist statements: as shown in Table 1, which lists all levels and attributes, we followed the mainstream literature on populism and selected an anti-elite statement ('all politicians are corrupted') and a people-centric claim ('the people should decide on important political matters'). The selection is particularly based on previous studies on the core characteristics of populism (Mudde, 2004) and on how scholars have measured populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014). The other two statements are non-populist, classic political claims about the need to respect rules and to assure that organized crime is prosecuted.³ Finally, and as mentioned, the three other politicians' attributes are related to their ideologies, previous job and gender.⁴

All the four statements we employ are political statements and, hence, beyond manipulating the presence of a populist frame, we inevitably vary as well their focal topic (i.e., corruption, crime, respect of laws, and economic policies). This may raise questions about information equivalence. However, a realistic setting with real political claims inevitably involves more than one dimension, and this solution is certainly preferable to a vignette with fake, neutral and mostly similar statements (Dafoe et al., 2018). Summing up our approach, Table 2 presents an example of a possible comparison.

Table 2. Example of conjoint vignette

Statement 1	Statement 2
Respecting rules is not a waste of time, but the only effective tool to avoid that new emergencies follow previous ones	The majority of people that rule this country are corrupt. It would be right to abolish any form of direct public financing of political parties
Politician 1	Politician 2
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	Female
<i>Previous job</i>	
Public employee	Professional politician
<i>Political ideology</i>	
Centre-right	Right

Measures

Before seeing the vignettes, respondents answered questions on their socio-demographic status, and questions to identify their cognitive, ideological and attitudinal profiles. For *cognitive attributes*, we operationalized ‘level of education’ as a dummy variable, equals to 1 if the respondent has at least a college degree and 0 otherwise, while ‘political interest’ is a dummy, equals to 1 if the respondent is highly or quite interested in politics and 0 otherwise. Regarding *ideological proximity*, we first recoded the original 0–10 left-right self-placement question into a five-categories variable to match the five ideological categories of the politicians presented in the vignette (0–2: left; 3–4: centre-left; 5: centre; 6–7: centre-right; 8–10: right). Hence, a respondent gets a value of 1 for ideological proximity if they share the same ideological position of the vignette politicians (i.e., right vs. right; centre-right vs. centre-right; etc.), and 0 otherwise.

Finally and concerning *attitudinal attributes*, we measured the populist attitudes of the respondents via two questions focusing on anti-elite and people-centric populism. Following Akkerman and colleagues’ survey (2014), we asked respondents how much (on a 0–4 scale) they agreed with the statements, ‘The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions’ and ‘What people call ‘compromise’ in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles.’ Then, via a factor analysis, we computed a factor score to get a synthetic measure of populism for each respondent. Those respondents who were above the median value of the resulting populist score are then coded as 1 (i.e., high populism), and the remaining as 0 (i.e., low populism).⁵ For trust in political institutions, we used a question related to trust in the Italian Parliament recoded as 1 if the respondent on a scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (total trust) gives an answer larger or equal to 6, and 0 otherwise.⁶ Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistics of these variables.⁷

Table 3. Characteristics of respondents: Descriptive statistics

Attribute	Mean	Standard deviation
Education	0.374	0.483
Political interest	0.655	0.475
Ideological proximity	0.193	0.395
Populism	0.5	0.5
Trust in political institutions	0.355	0.478

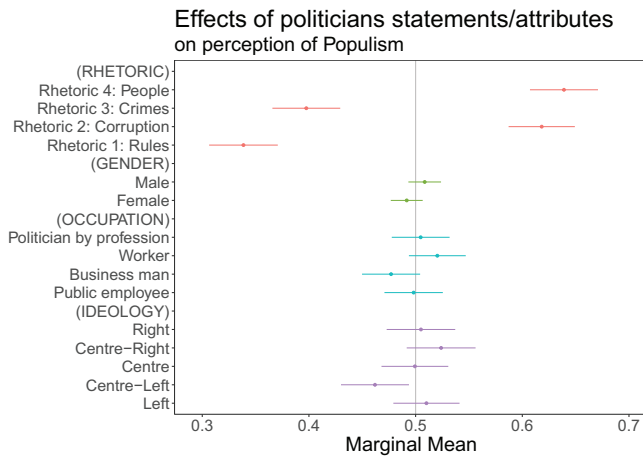


Figure 2. Who is a populist? Note: Horizontal lines are 95 per cent confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Results and discussion

Figure 2 presents our MM analysis for all attributes, where the dependent variable is a dummy for whom of the two politicians in the vignette respondents consider more populist. As shown by the first attribute – the statement the politician makes – respondents identify a strong populist claim, on either economic policy or corruption, and either people-centric or anti-elite, to be a powerful driver in deciding whether a politician is populist. For example, averaging across the other features of the object included in the design, the MM for a politician’s profile using the rhetorical sentence ‘People’ is 0.64 (i.e., a profile in which the rhetorical sentence of the politician is ‘People’ is selected with a probability of approximately 0.64). This translates into a 0.31 percentage points increase in being identified as populist compared to when a politician uses the rhetorical sentence ‘Rules’. Hence, rhetoric, and populist rhetoric, does matter. It is worth noticing that there is no significant difference between the effect of the two populist statements (i.e., ‘People’ and ‘Corruption’: difference: 0.02; SE 0.02; *t*-value: -0.91). Hence, public perceptions confirm the intuition of previous literature about the dual, core nature of populism centred on anti-elite and people-centric positions.

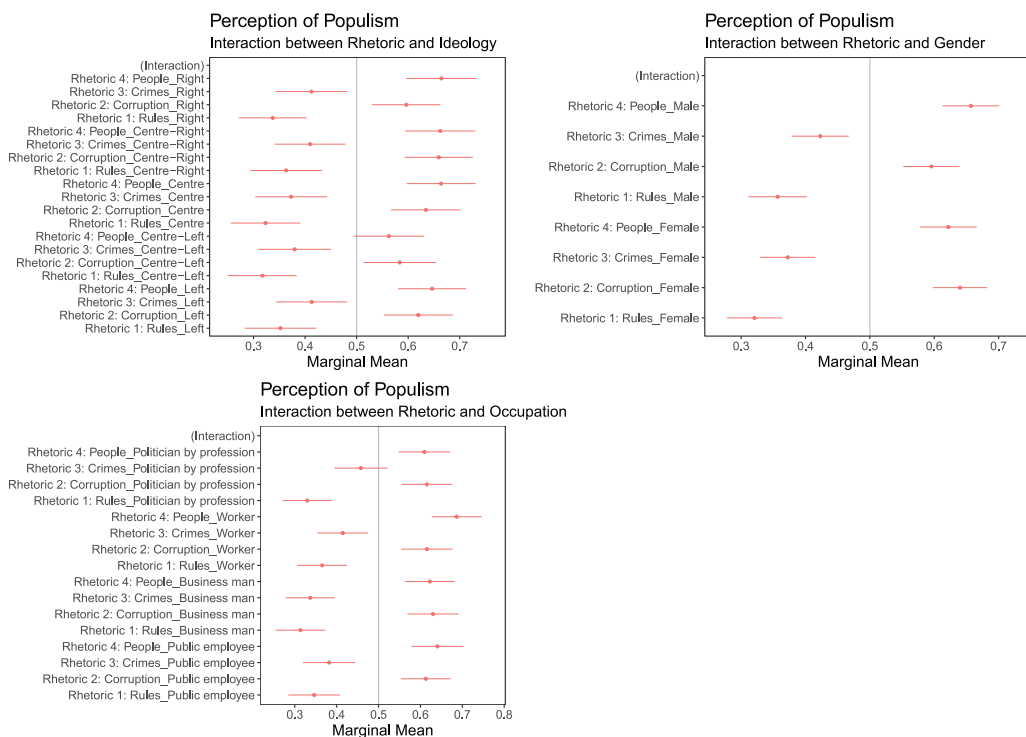


Figure 3. Interactions between Rhetoric and politicians’ other attributes. Note: Horizontal lines are 95 per cent confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Not only is rhetoric crucial for how the public identifies populism but is (almost) the only feature that matters. Looking at other variables, in almost every case the estimated impact is close to the benchmark of 0.5, therefore pointing to their substantial irrelevance. The only partial expectation is ideology: Politicians from the centre-left are identified as less populist, compared to both the centre-right and the two extremes, but not to their centrist counterparts.⁸ Hence, it seems that both the ‘populist hype’ and the perception that populism is more diffused among extreme political actors play a role, although marginal, in forming citizens’ attitudes towards populism.⁹ However, such an effect is considerably smaller than the one observed between populist and non-populist statements.¹⁰ Similarly, there are no differences between professional politicians and colleagues with other previous jobs. The same applies to gender, highlighting the irrelevance of such characteristics.

Hence, populism is essentially a rhetorical matter in the eye of the public and the relevance of rhetoric is not mediated by other attributes (Hainmueller et al., 2014). In Figure 3, indeed, we assess the possible existence of heterogeneity across conjoint features, investigating if the causal effect of one attribute (in our case: politician’s rhetoric) may vary depending on what value another attribute is held at. Figure 3 shows that the relevance of rhetoric is rather stable, irrespective of other attributes’ levels. In the top-left graph, for instance, the interaction between rhetoric and politicians’ ideology shows no significant differences across the entire spectrum. Counterintuitively enough, this important finding supports the intuition that, at least in the eyes

Table 4. Sub-group characteristics: *F*-test results

Respondents' characteristics	Politician's characteristics				
	Overall	Rhetoric	Ideology	Gender	Profession
Education (<i>cognitive</i>)	Not significant	<i>Significant</i>	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Political Interest (<i>cognitive</i>)	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Ideological proximity (<i>ideology</i>)	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Populism (<i>attitude</i>)	<i>Significant</i>	<i>Significant</i>	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant
Trust in Parliament (<i>attitude</i>)	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant	Not significant

of citizens, populism is mainly a rhetorical phenomenon, largely disconnected and independent from political ideology, gender, and other personal traits of supposedly populist politicians.¹¹

Sub-group analysis

We now investigate whether there is any systematic heterogeneity in the evaluation of candidates among respondents. Following Leeper and co-authors (2020), we tested for group differences in preferences via an *F*-test. Such an analysis runs a nested model comparison between a regression that includes interaction terms between a given subgrouping covariate (say education) and all feature levels (the rhetoric of a politician, her gender, etc.) and a model without such interactions. The former model generates estimates of level-specific differences in preferences via the coefficients on the interaction terms. The nested model comparison, on the other side, provides an omnibus test of sub-group differences. For example, this comparison can reveal if there are sizeable or only a few statistically apparent differences in preferences between two groups (e.g., high vs. low level of education). Formally, a nested model comparison provides an *F*-test of the null hypothesis that all interaction terms are equal to zero (i.e., whether a model *t* that accounts for group differences better fits the data than a model of support with only conjoint features as predictors). Table 4 reports the main findings of such tests.

As shown, most citizens' characteristics are not relevant in explaining how they identify populism. Contrary to our expectations, and to what previous literature has suggested regarding individual support for populism, for ideological proximity,¹² education, political interest¹³ and trust in political institutions,¹⁴ the resulting *F*-test for the model comparison again gives us little reason to believe that there are sub-group differences, at least at the 95 per cent confidence interval. That is, respondents largely agree on which dimensions are important in defining a populist politician, irrespective of the values of the above variables.

On the remaining respondents' characteristics, we detect a significant effect of the education variable, but only on the rhetoric feature of politicians (see Table 4). As Figure 4 shows, respondents who have a college degree construe the non-populist statement on crimes as

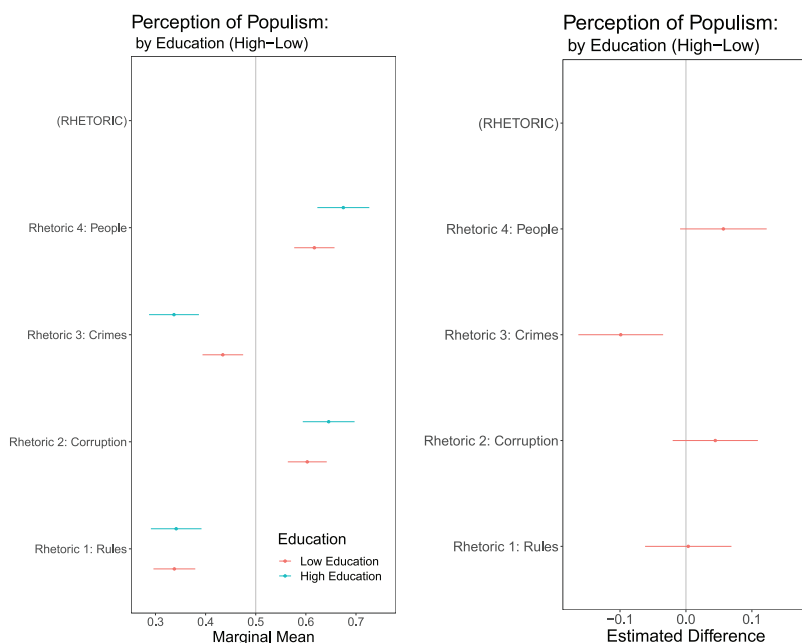


Figure 4. Conditional marginal means (left panel) and differences in conditional marginal means (right panel) of politicians' rhetoric, by education. Note: Estimates are MM conditional on the respondents' education. Horizontal lines are 95 per cent confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1475-6951.12589)]

significantly less populist than their less educated homologues. As we claimed, and supporting our theoretical expectation, education should foster greater analytical skills that drive highly educated respondents to identify a complex phenomenon as populism more accurately. In addition, they also seem more likely (see Figure 4) to identify as populist the statements on corruption and people (although the coefficients fall short of reaching statistical significance at the 95 per cent level, they are indeed in the right direction), hence again, not disproving the association between higher education and a more accurate identification of populism.

The only relevant sub-group characteristic that shows an overall significant F -test is that on populism, $F(12, 3,976, p < 0.000)$. This cross-respondent variation is entirely driven by differences in sensitivity to politicians' employed rhetoric: $F(4, 3,992, p < 0.000)$. Accordingly, Figure 5 shows the comparison of preferences as differences in sub-group MM between the two groups (populist and non-populist respondents) for the rhetorical features. The two groups have different preferences, as shown by the pairwise difference in means. In particular, populist respondents tend to interpret anti-elite and people-centric statements as far less populist compared to their non-populist fellow citizens, while, and interestingly, the opposite happens with the other two non-populist statements. A rhetoric framed on crimes and the rule of law is generally less likely to be perceived as populist (left-hand panel), in particular for voters low in populist attitudes. Overall, voters high in populist attitudes have a much less polarized opinion about populist rhetoric, while being comparatively less likely to perceive as such populist statements framed in terms of people-centrism and anti-elitism.

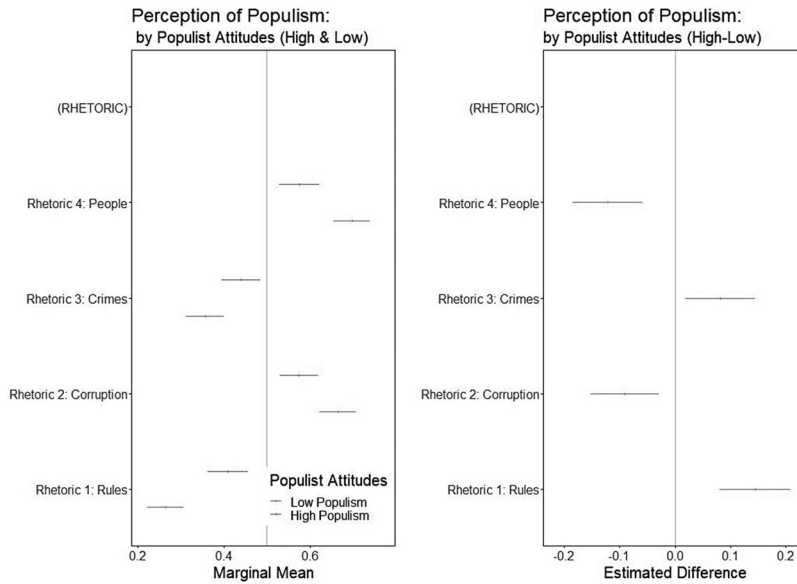


Figure 5. Conditional marginal means (left panel) and differences in conditional marginal means (right panel) of politicians' rhetoric, by populism. Note: Estimates are MM conditional on the populism rate of the respondent. Horizontal lines are 95 per cent confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1475-6951.12589)]

These findings provide engaging insights: first, the irrelevance of respondents' personal traits and political attitudes (i.e., their cognitive and ideological profile) casts a shadow on the diffused perception among academics and the media that factors such as political ideology or trust matter in how people identify and relate to populism. From a normative standpoint, they also suggest (indirectly) that elitist interpretations of populism as a phenomenon affecting the uneducated masses, but only truly understood by enlightened elites, are likely simplistic. While our results do not speak in terms of differences in the *effectiveness* of populist tropes, they nonetheless seem to indicate that few are cognitive misers when it comes to identify them. Whether this result replicates in other contexts, notably where the prevalence of populism and populist tropes is less widespread than in the Italian case, remains an interesting empirical question.

Second, the fact that populist citizens are substantively less likely to identify populism according to the rhetoric employed by politicians, suggests that they might still see populism under a negative light and are hence not willing to classify as populist anti-elite or people-centric statements that they mostly agree with. On the other hand, this result may indicate that they simply do not think that such statements are populist, and hence hold different ideas about what populism really represents. With this in mind, we should then expect populist voters to be less likely to identify populist cues – simply because they are naturally inclined not to perceive them as problematic.

Conclusion

Investigating the largely unexplored territory of how citizens identify populist politicians, our article provides novel, insightful results. First, rhetoric, and populist rhetoric in particular, does

significantly matter for such identification patterns, as all other characteristics of politicians are largely inconsequential. Second, respondents' own populist attitudes are crucial in determining how they identify populist politicians and populist rhetoric. Likely drawing from their political preferences, and yet influenced by the negative, broad stigmatization of populism, populist citizens conceive people-centric and anti-elite political claims as weaker predictors of the populism of a politician compared to non-populist respondents. More generally, indeed, populist citizens show much less variation in their classification of the four statements. On the other hand, also education matters, though to a lower extent, as highly educated respondents identify populist and non-populist statements in a more accurate way compared to less educated citizens. Interestingly enough, all other characteristics of respondents, such as political ideology and political interest do not show relevant differences across the sub-groups.

These findings generate interesting implications for the literature on populism and on political behaviour more broadly. To some extent, citizens construe populism as previous literature has suggested concerning populism's core features. For them, populism is essentially a rhetorical phenomenon and they do distinguish between anti-elite, people-centric statements and non-populist political claims. However, a counterintuitive, insightful finding this article generates is that rhetoric appears to be the only factor that explains citizens' perceptions of populism, hence casting doubts on the literature about the ideological dimension of populism, such as the works on the 'populist hype'. Indeed, it may be the case that such hype characterizes academic and media perceptions and discussion on populism, rather than public opinions.

To be sure, this does not mean that they are less likely to be influenced by populism and populist rhetoric. Indeed, Bos and colleagues (2013) show that less educated and more cynical citizens are more prone to be persuaded by populist politicians' rhetoric, and strong evidence exists that lower education is associated with greater support for populist parties (Cordero et al., 2022; Schmuck & Matthes, 2015). In line with this literature, indeed, we have shown that more educated respondents seem better able to distinguish populist from non-populist rhetoric. Rather, this increased persuasiveness could stem precisely from the fact that they are less likely to perceive populism as such – much in the same way as less educated people seem less likely to identify disinformation at face value.

Next, regarding the characteristics of citizens, what emerges as crucial are respondents' populist attitudes. Aside from education, the implication here is that the cognitive and ideological profile of respondents is largely inconsequential, a result that contrasts with previous literature's emphasis on the importance of ideology, and political trust to explain populist attitudes. If these factors may matter to explain patterns of voting behavior, they are not relevant for the public's interpretation of who is a populist. This implies that evidently populist politicians do not really need to rely on a strong populist rhetoric to be 'recognized' by populist voters.

Following on this point, our investigation has significant implications within and beyond academic research as well. First, a systematic investigation of how the public defines populism, and whom they label as a populist tells a story about how politicians could avoid, or possibly seek, a recognized status of populist. Second, the assessment of which citizens' characteristics lead them to see a certain degree of populism in political statements and politicians can further advance our knowledge about which potential voters populist politicians do, and possibly should, target. Furthermore, the use of a conjoint experiment to analyse attitudes towards populism may establish a novel approach to the study of populism, as previous studies have employed experimental

approaches mostly to assess the effect of populist rhetoric on voters (Bos et al., 2013, 2020) or which factors increase voters' support of populist parties (Bakker et al., 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016).

Finally, although the focus on one single country may reduce the potential of generalization of our results and considering that our experimental approach guarantees internal, not external, validity, the Italian case remains, in our opinion, a particularly relevant one to investigate. From a substantive standpoint, Italy is often cited as an example of a political system with populist actors across the political spectrum (also historically), as well as a rather challenging party system – which makes the prevalence of the phenomenon stand out. From a methodological standpoint, the widespread presence of populism in the Italian case makes, as we have argued, the country as a 'hard-case scenario' for an investigation into how and why voters perceive populism in political elites – and most notably for the link between ideological cues and the identification of populism, for which the Italian case should yield conservative estimates.

This comes, however, with a substantial limitation, when it comes to translate the results into other contexts: the lower the endemicity of populism in a given country, the higher the chances that idiosyncratic elements of political actors come into play – for instance, their political alignment. In a country where all political factions can turn populist, the role of their ideology is not likely to be particularly relevant for the voters, but when populism becomes rare who goes populist likely matters. With this in mind, future studies should try to replicate our investigation in other countries, testing whether our results hold in different political contexts – and likely considering the moderation role of political ideology, either in substantive terms or in terms of extremity. Furthermore, exploiting the potential of manipulation in experimental research, especially using conjoint designs, scholars could test whether other characteristics of politicians and citizens influence the latter's attitudes towards populism and associated identification patterns.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement

Dataset and replication files are available here: <http://www.luigicurini.com/scientific-publications.html>

Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

Notes

1. Other studies employed a conjoint approach to investigate populism (Neuner & Wratil, 2022; Silva et al., 2022), though focusing on the effectiveness of populist rhetoric versus policy messages, rather than the perception of citizens about populist politicians.
2. All effects are estimated using the *cregg*-package in R (Leeper et al., 2020).
3. To further check the robustness of our selection, we applied to the four statements employed in our experiment, the dictionary of Italian political populism in Decadri and Boussalis (2020). The results are as expected, as the anti-elite statement and the people-centric claim are both classified as populist, while the opposite happens for the other two sentences. (See the online Appendix for the phrasing in Italian of the four sentences.)
4. To prevent the manifestation of any primacy effect (i.e., the possibility that respondents pay more attention to the attributes that appear near the top of the conjoint table) Hainmueller et al. (2014) suggest randomizing the order of the attributes. We have not followed, however, this route given that our vignette contains an extremely limited amount of information (an average of 24 words per profile and just four attributes). In addition, respondents saw all attributes at the same time in each given vignette. This short profile comparison should reduce the potential impact of any primacy effect.
5. Results remain similar if we replicate the analysis by keeping the two populist questions separated. (See the online Appendix.)
6. Changing this operationalization, for example by re-computing it as 1 for any value larger than the mean (i.e., 4.35) and 0 otherwise, does not affect any result.
7. All results are based on survey weights. Weights were constructed employing the widely used raking method, whereby cell counts are adjusted so that the marginal totals match the control totals. Note that our results remain substantially the same if we replicate the analysis without weights.
8. The difference between Centre-left versus Left politicians produces a *t*-value of -2.13 ; Centre-Left versus Centre-Right: -2.68 ; Centre-Left versus Right: -1.87 ; Centre-Left versus Centre: -1.64 .
9. Such findings may descend also from specific characteristics of the Italian political landscape and party system, where the main centre-left formation, the Democratic Party, has suffered from far less accusations of populism compared to all other parties.
10. We further tested the potential quadratic relationship between ideology and extremism, performing two additional tests in which we re-grouped vignette politicians according to their ideological positions: in the first case, we grouped together the two extreme categories (i.e., left and right) versus the remaining three centrist categories (i.e., centre-left, centre and centre-right). In the second case, we considered the rightist politicians versus all the others. As we report in Figures 6A and 7A in the Online Appendix, ideology still has no significant effect, pointing at the already underlined negligible effect played by politicians' ideology.
11. We ran a series of robustness tests. First, we checked for balance in the frequencies of attributes by experimental trait. Second, we re-ran models removing respondents who spent less than 36 seconds (i.e., the first quartile in the distribution of our sample) on the two-vignettes administered during the experiment. Third, we re-ran models removing respondents that provided blatantly inaccurate answers, that is, respondents who claimed they usually spend more than 15 hours per-day watching or reading political news. Fourth, we checked for the assumption of stability in respondents' preferences across the two rounds of choices. All the results reported in the paper appear to be robust in each of these circumstances. (See the Online Appendix.)
12. The ideological self-placement of respondents do not show the existence of any subgroup difference.
13. We also operationalized 'political interest' using the time spent to read/watch/listen to political news without producing any substantial difference in our estimation.
14. Note that the correlation between the variable 'Trust in Parliament' and the variable 'Populism' is almost absent (-0.11), implying, therefore, that these two sets of variables are significantly different. This interesting result may be because that, at least in Italy, distrust towards the Parliament is equally diffused among populist and non-populist citizens.

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